

Flexible funding allows child welfare systems in two California counties to invest in innovative practices that effectively safeguard vulnerable children while reducing the number of children in foster care

Real-world experiences in Los Angeles and Alameda counties demonstrate what can happen when child welfare systems have the funding flexibility to invest in policies and practices that they know are successful at improving the lives of vulnerable children and families.

In both counties, the number of children in foster care is safely decreasing due to the policies and practices that flexible funding make possible:

- **In the first 18 months that Los Angeles County used flexible funding to invest in strategic reforms, the number of children in foster care went down 17.7 percent, from 20,302 in June 2007, to 16,710 in December 2008.**
- **Alameda County experienced a 10.4 percent reduction in the number of children in foster care, from 2,330 in June 2007, to 2,090 in December 2008.**

On the front end, both counties are investing in preventing child abuse and neglect through practices that strengthen families and communities. That way children can remain safe at home whenever possible and avoid the trauma of being removed from their families.

At the back end, each county is employing successful new approaches to finding safe, loving and permanent homes for children who have been—or seem destined to be—in foster care for unacceptably long periods of time.

As the number of children who are able to safely remain home with their families continues to increase, both counties have the flexibility to reinvest in sustaining and broadening innovative practices that can further enhance positive real life outcomes for children and families.

The bottom line is that thousands of children in Los Angeles and Alameda counties are now better off, growing up in safe and stable home environments that will nurture them into becoming productive adults—and eventually into becoming strong parents themselves.

Effective practices implemented last year because of funding flexibility:

- Alameda County expanded its “Alternative Response” program, which helps prevent child neglect and abuse by offering parents the community services they need to raise their families safely and successfully. The county now offers “Alternative Response” to families with children of all ages, and provides six months of after-care support to reunified families.
- Los Angeles County established special “Youth Permanency Units” to target older youth most at risk of aging out of foster care with no permanent families or homes. These units work closely with the youth to identify family connections and re-establish those ties.

Currently, states and counties are limited in the approaches they can take to improve the lives of children.

The successes in Los Angeles and Alameda counties can be attributed to their ability to support a wide range of effective practices that result in safely reducing the number of children in foster care.

Since July 1, 2007, the two counties have been able to invest in a comprehensive and responsive array of child welfare and probation services that better meet the needs of vulnerable children and families.

Improvements in Los Angeles and Alameda counties include:

- **Greater family involvement in the decision-making processes that affect their children.**
- **Smaller, more manageable caseloads for frontline workers.**
- **Better recruitment and support of foster families.**
- **Better services for older youth in foster care who are transitioning to independent living as adults.**
- **Increased placements with relatives, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles.**
- **Improved mental health, substance abuse and domestic violence assessments and services.**
- **Enhanced evidence-based services for probation youth.**

Effective practices on the horizon because of funding flexibility:

- In Los Angeles County, an additional 5,000 early assessments will be done annually for families in need of mental health, substance abuse or domestic violence services. This will help reduce the number of children entering foster care by getting parents the services they need to safely raise their children.
- New front-end “Family Finding and Engagement” priorities in Alameda County will make it more likely that children can live with grandparents, aunts and uncles soon after being removed from their parents’ home. These relatives are expected to be much more involved in efforts to safely reunite children with their parents and considered as legal guardians when reunification is not appropriate.